KHENPO'S TALKS

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

COSMOLOGY IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM

KHENPO SODARGYE

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Cosmology in Tibetan Buddhism

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Khenpo Sodargye

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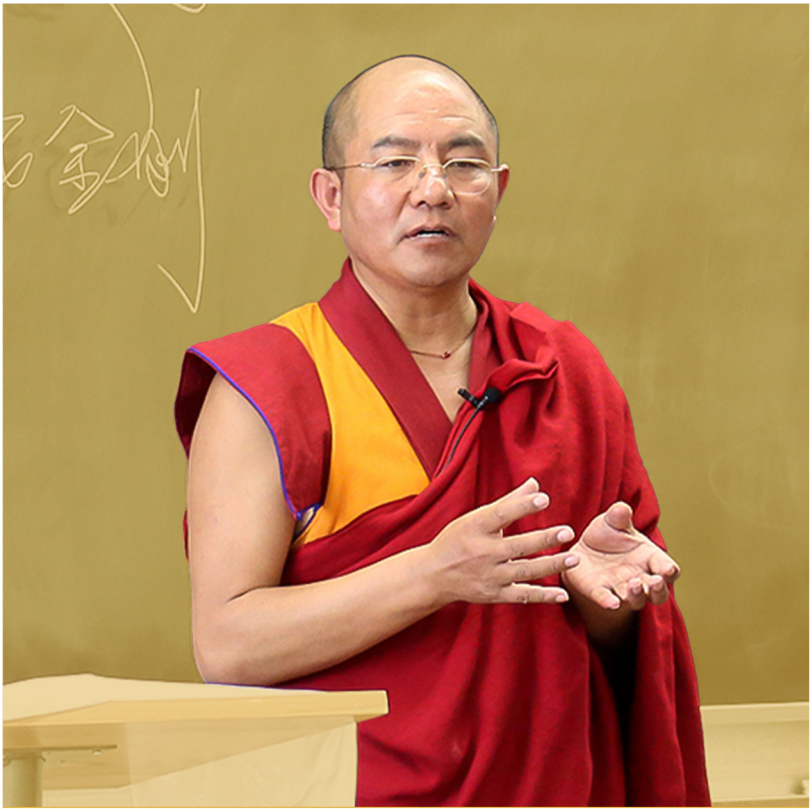
Why do we see things so differently? It's because each of us has our own habits or predispositions, which are subtle mental tendencies shaped by our past positive and negative actions. This is what shapes how we perceive the world.



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Host

Today, we are delighted to welcome our distinguished guest, Khenpo Sodargye, to the University of Toronto and to our Introduction to Buddhism class. The Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto has become a thriving and vital part of our academic institution. Among the many religious disciplines taught at UT, there is the study of Buddhism.

Not so many years ago, Buddhist philosophy at UT was not taught through its own department. It was taught as an adjunct to the Department of Philosophy, with a primary focus on early Buddhism and Sanskrit. In recent years, however, Buddhism has been established as a discipline in its own right within the Department for the Study of Religion. As a result, a wide range of Buddhist courses is now available to students.

The department has flourished with a growing faculty of distinguished professors. For example, your own professor, Professor Francis Garrett, who is an expert in Tibetan Buddhist studies with a focus on Tibetan embryology; Christoph Emerick, who is a scholar in Sanskrit and Pali, and teaches Newar Buddhism and Indian Buddhism; and Amanda Goodman, an expert on

Han Buddhism. So students have a great faculty and a lot of choices of courses.

In addition, there have also been new languages introduced. We now have our own Tibetan khenpo, who teaches Tibetan language courses at the university, and Christoph Emmrich offers classes in Pali, as well as a variety of introductory and advanced Sanskrit courses. All three campuses of the University of Toronto now offer courses in Buddhism, reflecting a growing and sustained interest in Buddhist studies both at the university and across North America.

I would like to say a few words about our distinguished guest today, Khenpo Sodargye. He is a highly respected and erudite teacher, knowledgeable in many fields of Buddhist learning and meditation. He received his training at the great Sertar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy under the direction of his esteemed master, Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche.

After many years of study and training, he began his teaching through the instruction and order of his own guru. In particular, he took on the role of teaching the many Chinese students affiliated with his center and lineage, and his activities in this regard have been truly remarkable. He has written over 100 books in Chinese and has countless devoted students in China

and elsewhere across the globe. His name itself, The Great Spreading of Good Fortune, certainly it is our good fortune today, and we are delighted to have the opportunity to have him teach on the subject of "Cosmology in Tibetan Buddhism"—an interesting and diverse topic rarely taught in the West. Now, please welcome Khenpo Sodargye.

Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche

Buddhism and the Boundless Universe

I am very happy to be here today at the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. From the introduction, I learned that your department has done a lot of work in Buddhist studies and related fields. I myself am a practitioner focused on Buddhist study and practice, but I am also very interested in exploring knowledge about morality, science, technology, and other areas that help improve the well-being of humanity, whether from Eastern or Western traditions.

Today, I would like to share a bit about the cosmology of Tibetan Buddhism. As you may know, Tibetan Buddhism originally came from India and, for many centuries, was mostly practiced in the Tibetan regions. It was not until the 1950s and 60s that it started to spread more widely around the world—including to Southeast Asia, North America, and Europe. In recent decades, it has attracted a lot of interest, especially among scholars and people looking for meaning in their lives. Many have found that its teachings can be very helpful for both physical and mental

well-being, as well as for developing wisdom and compassion. But I will not go into too much detail about that today.

I have heard that many of you are interested in how Buddhism views the universe, and how those ancient views from over 2,500 years ago compare with modern scientific perspectives, their similarities and differences, for example. I will exchange some ideas with you about it during our time together.

We all know that the world can be looked at from both microscopic and macroscopic perspectives. Today, I will focus more on the big picture. Just yesterday, as I was flying here from Australia, I was thinking on the plane about how small we humans are—especially when you consider the size of the Milky Way galaxy. The Milky Way is said to have between 100 and 400 billion stars. In such a vast universe, our earth is just a tiny speck, and each of us is even smaller. It really puts things into perspective.

Regarding the Milky Way, so far in the 21st century, there has not been a religious description of the cosmos that matches exactly with the scientific understanding. That is not surprising—science is always evolving, and religions also have many different ways of looking at the universe. So, with all this in mind, it is natural to ask: how does Buddhism see the world?

According to Buddhist cosmology, if we begin with the world we live in as the basic unit, a thousand of these worlds together make up what is called a "thousandfold world system," or chiliocosm. A thousand of those systems form a "second-order thousandfold world system," known as a dichiliocosm. If you multiply that by a thousand again, you get a "third-order thousandfold world system," or trichiliocosm. In other words, a trichiliocosm represents a universe of one billion worlds. And if we take into account all the stars and planets within such a system, the scale becomes even more mind-boggling. Buddhism also teaches that there are countless trichiliocosms, and that Buddha Shakyamuni is the enlightened teacher of one of them.

So, more than two thousand years ago, Buddhism already described the universe as infinite, which was a very forward-thinking and visionary idea for its time. Many people who study Buddhist cosmology are amazed when they see these huge numbers, and often wonder, "How can there be so many worlds!" Even today, many young college students studying cosmology find the vastness of the universe and the idea that it could be infinite to be incredible and unimaginable.

Although these ideas might seem beyond our everyday understanding, they actually point to the true nature of the universe. In fact, the universe is probably even more incredible than we can imagine. As science continues to advance, I believe we will find more and more similarities between scientific discoveries and Buddhist views on the cosmos.


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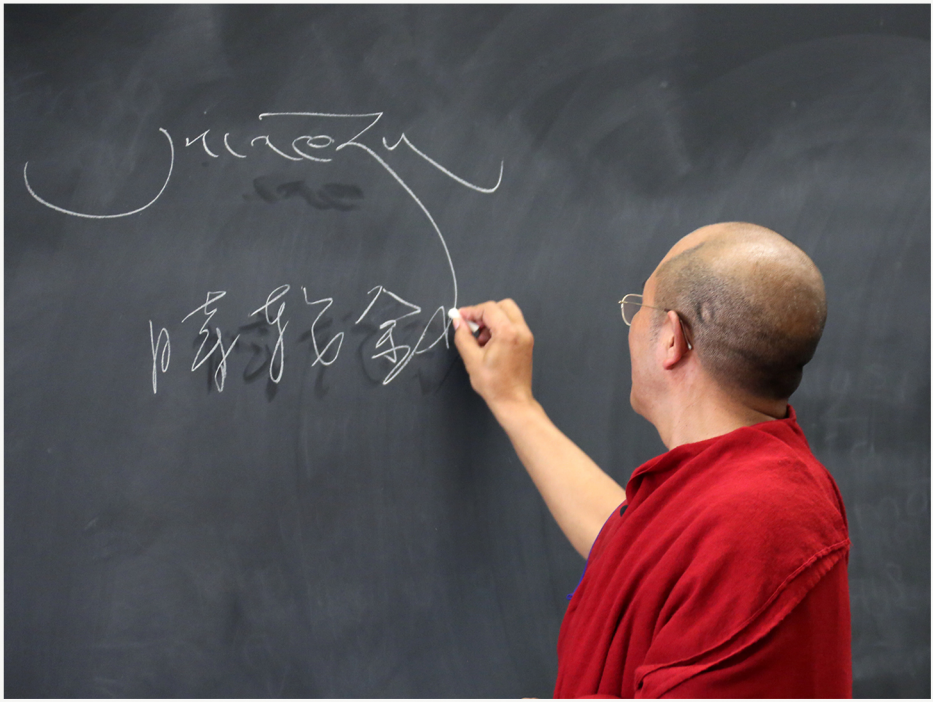


How the Universe Begins and Ends: Two Perspectives

So far, I have been talking about the universe as a whole. If we look at how the universe began, how it has changed, and what its future might be, these are questions that have fascinated scientists, astronomers, and curious people for a long time. When it comes to the origin of the universe, there are many different ideas, but the most widely accepted and leading scientific explanation today is the Big Bang Theory.

At its heart, the Big Bang Theory says that the universe started out as an extremely hot and dense point about 13.8 billion years ago, and it has been expanding ever since. It was not an explosion like a bomb going off in space, but more like space itself rapidly stretching out, carrying matter and energy with it in all directions. So, it was not an explosion inside space—it was actually the expansion of space itself.

Buddhism, on the other hand, has a distinct perspective on how the world began. In Buddhist cosmology, the universe goes through a repeating cycle of four stages: formation, duration, destruction, and voidness. Each of these stages lasts for twenty intermediate kalpas. A kalpa is the unit of measurement of

cosmological time in Buddhist thought, and an intermediate kalpa is an aeon during which the lifespan of living beings gradually shrinks, from almost unimaginable lengths down to as little as ten years.

The entire cycle of the four stages is quite complex, but I will give you a brief overview. Before the world forms, there is only great voidness. From this voidness, subtle currents of wind begin to emerge and gather, though they cannot be seen. As the wind grows stronger, it brings about heavy rains. The wind stirs and churns the rain, which then condenses into solid matter—first forming a golden base, and then the earth itself. On this foundation, the physical or material world starts to take shape: mountains, continents, vast oceans, and so forth.

The whole process of forming the material world takes place over one intermediate kalpa. After that, the world of living beings gradually develops, which takes another nineteen intermediate kalpas. So, in total, it takes twenty intermediate kalpas for both the physical world and all living beings to fully come into existence. In Buddhism, this is called the Kalpa of Formation.

After the Kalpa of Formation comes the Kalpa of Duration, which also lasts for twenty intermediate kalpas. During this time, the world remains in a state of relative stability. It is

followed by the Kalpa of Destruction, marked first by the decline of sentient beings, then by the disintegration of the material world itself, which is destroyed in a vast cosmic fire known as the "kalpa-ending conflagration." Once everything is destroyed completely, the universe enters the Kalpa of Voidness, where nothing remains—no living beings, no material world—and this voidness lasts for another twenty intermediate kalpas.

When it comes to how stars end their lives, science explains it like this: During most of a star's lifetime, its core produces heat and radiation through nuclear reactions. When a medium-sized star like our sun runs out of fuel, it expands into a red giant, sheds its outer layers to form a planetary nebula, and its core becomes a white dwarf that slowly cools over time. Massive stars end even more dramatically, exploding in a supernova. Scientists believe that many stars in the universe are currently at different stages of this process.

Buddhism also teaches that, among all the trichiliocosms or countless universes, some are in the stage of formation, some in duration, and others in destruction. So, across the vastness of space, there are universes of all different ages and stages: some are old, some are young, some are ending, and some are just beginning. This actually sounds quite similar to some modern

scientific ideas, like the multiverse theory, which suggests there could be an infinite number of universes, with ours being just one of them. The Buddhist view of infinite trichiliocosms might even offer some interesting insights for scientists exploring the idea of the multiverse.

Changing Views of the Universe: From Geocentrism to Infinity

Throughout history, people's understanding of the universe has changed a lot. As early as the 3rd century BCE, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle proposed a geocentric view of the cosmos. He put the Earth at the center of the universe, standing still, while the Sun, Moon, and other celestial bodies moved around it.

A few centuries later, in the 2nd century CE, the Greek astronomer Ptolemy built on Aristotle's idea and created a detailed model where the Sun, Moon, and planets all orbited a stationary Earth. This geocentric view was widely accepted for almost 1,500 years. In fact, the idea that the Earth is at the center of everything is something most of us learned about in school as basic knowledge.

This geocentric view is quite similar to what we find in some Hindu and Vedic teachings, as well as in certain early Buddhist Abhidharma texts, though there are some small differences. In these traditions, it is also believed that the sun moves around our world from east to west.

It was not until the 16th century that the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus introduced a new idea—the heliocentric theory. He suggested that the sun is stationary at the center, and the Earth actually moves around it. Copernicus published this theory in his famous book, *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Orbs*, in 1543. At first, though, his theory did not get much attention, since it went against the religious and philosophical beliefs of the time.

Later on, the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno embraced and took Copernicus's heliocentric idea even further. He argued that there must be an infinite number of worlds out there, and that many of them could be inhabited just like ours.

In Bruno's view, the universe had no center, and he believed that the universe and God were one and the same—divinity was present in everything, and everything was filled with that divinity. He saw God not as a distant creator, but as something present within the infinite universe itself, which is a view known as pantheism.

Bruno's ideas were very radical for his time and directly challenged the teachings of the Catholic Church, which supported a finite, earth-centered universe based on Aristotle's philosophy. Because of his unorthodox beliefs, Bruno was put on trial for

heresy, and in 1600, he was executed by burning at the stake. Most historians agree that it was mainly his heretical theological views that led to his death. In any case, Bruno's philosophy offered a bold and very different way of thinking about human nature, the universe, and God compared to the ideas that dominated the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

In 1609, Galileo Galilei invented the telescope and started making incredible discoveries about the heavens. A few years later, in 1613, he published *Letters on Sunspots*, where he openly supported Copernicus's idea that the Earth moves around the Sun. So, it actually took more than fifty years after Copernicus for his theory to be backed up by real telescopic evidence. Galileo's work really changed how people thought about the structure of the universe.

Bruno's idea of an infinite universe, filled with countless solar systems and stars, is actually quite similar to a famous Buddhist analogy—the idea that there are as many worlds as there are grains of sand in the Ganges River. Many Buddhist texts, especially the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, have long stated the existence of worlds that are truly beyond counting with this analogy. So, from the Buddhist point of view, ultimately, the universe is made up of immeasurable worlds.

I know that, as students and faculty from the Department for the Study of Religion, many of you are very interested in Buddhist cosmology. While I wish I could share more with you, our time today is limited. If you would like to learn more, I recommend that you read some Buddhist texts on cosmology, such as the chapter on "The Flower Bank World" in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. This chapter gives vivid descriptions of numerous kinds of worlds. For example, one line says that depending on the karma of sentient beings, these infinite worlds can appear in all sorts of shapes with different characteristics—some are round, some square, some triangular, some look like whirlpools, some like trees, and some are even upside down or sideways. Even from just this one line, you may get a sense of how Buddhism describes the universe.

Seeing the World: Karma, Quantum Physics, and Ancient Wisdom

I have been interested in astronomy for many years and have read a lot of books on the subject, both from Eastern and Western perspectives. From my own experience, I feel that if we really want to understand the world we live in, it is necessary to look at what Buddhist teachings have to say about the universe. For example, as I mentioned earlier, Buddhism talks about different worlds arising because of the different karma of sentient beings. Karma is a special term in Buddhism, but it actually plays a big role in our everyday lives.

So, what is karma? The word literally means "action," but it also refers to the law of cause and effect—good actions bring happiness, while harmful actions lead to suffering. But how does karma impact our lives? For instance, take the same object: some people might think it is beautiful, others might see it as just average, and some might even find it unattractive. Or with the same person, some people find them very attractive, others think they are just okay, and people from another culture might even think they are not attractive at all.

Why do we see things so differently? It is because each of us has our own habits or predispositions, which are subtle mental tendencies shaped by our past positive and negative actions, or karma. This is what shapes how we perceive the world. In fact, there is no fixed, absolute quality like "beauty" or "ugliness" in things themselves. If there were, everyone would see things exactly the same way. But in reality, we all have our own unique ways of seeing and judging the world, which arise due to our individual karma. So our perceptions are not definite or uniform.

The Buddhist idea that objects do not have any fixed, inherent qualities seems to, in a way, echo Heisenberg's uncertainty principle in quantum mechanics. This principle states that for certain pairs of physical properties—like position and momentum—you cannot know both with perfect accuracy at the same time. The more precisely you know one, the less precisely you can know the other. At the macroscopic level, the uncertainties are so small that they are negligible, so properties like position and velocity appear definite and objective to all observers. But at the quantum level, all measurable properties are subject to uncertainty relations, not just position and momentum, but also things like energy and time. So, at that scale, nothing is absolutely definite or certain.

As a Tibetan, I am reminded of a folk saying from my culture: "The same thing can appear as a triangle to some and as a square to others." There is profound wisdom in this saying. While we may not literally see different shapes, our experiences and perceptions can be very different, depending on our values, upbringing, and backgrounds. This is particularly evident when comparing Eastern and Western perspectives.

The same can be said for how we understand the world itself. If we explore the world by bringing together insights from Buddhism and the uncertainty principle, it might offer us new lenses through which to see reality, and perhaps make important discoveries along the way.

Now, through scientific observation, we know that the Earth is a sphere. Interestingly, an ancient Buddhist text called the *Pearl Garland Tantra* also mentions that, through the forces of wind and water, eleven million spherical worlds are formed in the universe. This is one of the earliest Buddhist statements about the universe, and for its time, it was a remarkably advanced idea.

I am not sharing this to promote Buddhism just because it is my own background—there is really no need for that. I have always felt that, as human beings, we should look for truth with

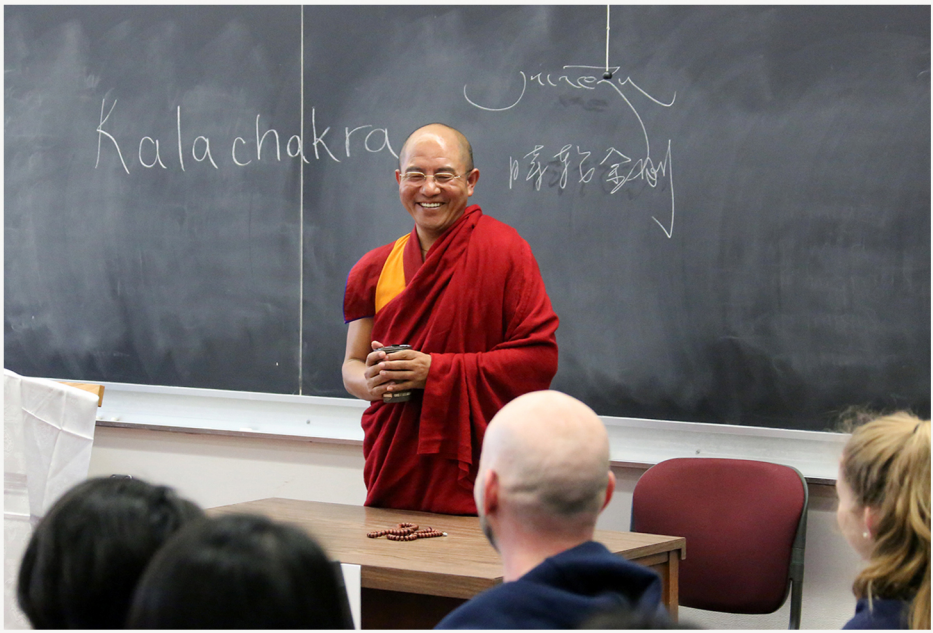
an open and unbiased mind. If something is true, it is worth exploring, whether it comes from religion or science. Truth goes beyond those boundaries, and I think we should all approach it with that attitude.

Indian philosophy also has some fascinating ideas about the world and the universe. For example, in the 5th century CE, there was a brilliant astronomer and mathematician in India named Aryabhata. He was believed to have studied at Nalanda University, which was a major Buddhist center of learning—its status in India back then was comparable to Harvard's today. In his famous book, the *Aryabhatiya*, Aryabhata introduced some groundbreaking ideas about the Earth and how the heavens work.

Aryabhata described the Earth as a perfect sphere, made up of the four classical elements: earth, water, fire, and air. He also proposed that the Earth rotates on its axis, and he used a really clever analogy to explain it: just as someone in a moving boat sees a stationary object moving backward, a person standing on the Earth would see the stars appear to move westward in a straight line, even though they are actually stationary. For his time, this was an incredibly advanced idea. When I first read about this, I realized that Eastern cultures had their own

explanations of the universe and celestial movements as early as the 5th century.


Kalachakra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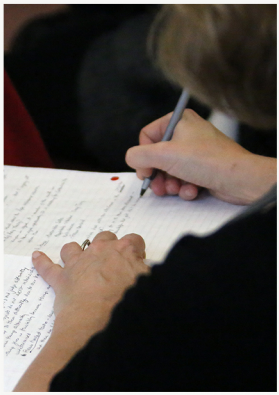

Kalachakra Tantra: Bridging Buddhist and Scientific Views

If you are interested in learning more about Tibetan Buddhist cosmology, I recommend looking into the *Kalachakra Tantra*. Many Tibetan Buddhist teachers today give Kalachakra empowerments and teach from this important text.

The first chapter of the text, called "outer Kalachakra," focuses on the physical world, and its views actually line up quite well with what we know from modern astronomy. The astrological system described here is the basis for the Tibetan calendar, which has been used in Tibetan regions for over a thousand years. Using this system, people have been able to calculate things like the changing seasons, weather patterns, and even the timing of solar and lunar eclipses—without any modern astronomical tools.

What is really fascinating is that many of the calculations in the Kalachakra system are surprisingly close to what we find in today's astronomy. For example, the orbits of the sun and moon—what we call the ecliptic and the lunar orbit—have intersection points. The Kalachakra system calculates the nodal cycle, or the time it takes for these points to complete a full

cycle, as about 6,792 days. Modern astronomy puts it at about 18.6 years, or roughly 6,793 days, so they are almost identical. Both systems also agree that the Earth's orbit around the sun is about 365 days. For planets like Jupiter and Mars, the differences in their orbital periods are only at the decimal level. The *Kalachakra Tantra* even describes the material makeup of planets like Mercury, Jupiter, and Saturn, linking them to elements such as earth, wood, and metal.

This is just a brief introduction to the "outer Kalachakra." The *Kalachakra Tantra* was taught by Buddha Shakyamuni to a select group of disciples in southern India shortly before his passing. Over the centuries, many scholars have devoted themselves to studying it. If this topic interests you, I encourage you to visit Tibetan monasteries that offer courses on Kalachakra and explore these teachings further. I believe you will find some remarkable similarities and gain new insights when you compare these ancient ideas with what we know from modern astronomy.

Besides explaining the physical world, the *Kalachakra Tantra* also explores what is called the "inner Kalachakra," which is all about the human body. It describes the body as being made up of six elements: earth, water, fire, air, gnosis (or awareness),

and space. The body, like the universe, goes through stages of formation, duration, destruction, and voidness. The text also explains how, through practice, a person can transform their ordinary mind into what is called the mind of clear light, and ultimately reach liberation.

Understanding the Mind, Understanding the World

From a Buddhist point of view, while it is valuable to study the external world, understanding our inner world and the nature of the mind is seen as even more important. That is why, although Tibetan Buddhist scholars have always been passionate about learning and discovering external truth—just like many academics today—they put even more emphasis on exploring the mind and developing spiritually. They believe that without real practice and personal realizations, even the deepest intellectual knowledge cannot bring genuine fulfillment or liberation in life.

In Tibetan Buddhist history, there was a famous scholar named Buton Rinchen Drup who made great contributions to human knowledge through his writings. In his later years, he became very interested in astronomy and devoted a lot of time to studying it, sometimes even at the expense of his spiritual practice. Later Buddhist scholars often disagree with this, believing that spiritual cultivation should always come first, ahead of secular pursuits.

While not everyone here may share Buddhist beliefs, I think there are some connections between Buddhism and science that are worth exploring together. By looking at where these two perspectives meet, we can work toward discovering lasting truths about both the outer world and our inner mind. Only such truths can really stay with us throughout our lives.

These days, people everywhere are searching for perfection and beauty in their outer lives, and that is of course necessary. But I believe that, while external beauty and perfection are nice, it is even more important to focus on inner beauty, because that does not fade or change with time. If we only chase after outward appearances, they can easily disappear or lose their appeal as the years go by. That is why I think pursuing inner perfection and beauty is truly valuable.

It is hard to know how much time or opportunity any of us will have to study the outside world, but we all have the chance to understand and purify our own inner world. This, I believe, is the most important thing. We should also pay attention to the people around us and our communities, and do our best to seek knowledge and wisdom that benefit both ourselves and others. While seeking knowledge is important, even more important is taking responsibility for ourselves and really trying

to understand our own minds. Living this way, I think, leads to a truly meaningful life.

The universe is incredibly vast, but if you think about it, it can be brought down to the small world around us, and even further, to our own minds. If we can understand our own minds, in a way, we have also come to understand the true nature of the universe.

When I was a student, I read a poem by an Indian scholar. He wrote that sometimes we should pay attention to the colorful world outside, because it helps us understand our own inner minds. Other times, we should look inward and observe our minds, whose nature is the unity of clarity and emptiness, and through that, we can also come to appreciate the beauty of the world around us. That is what I want to share with you today.


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Kalachakra

Question and Answer

Question 1 Could you please explain the model of Mount Meru, including the surrounding continents and the heavens above?

Khenpo Sodargye According to the *Treasury of Abhidharma*, Mount Meru is located at the center of a world-system in traditional Buddhist cosmology. It is surrounded by seven concentric oceans, each separated by a ring of golden mountains. Beyond these rings are the four great continents and eight subcontinents. Humans are said to live on the southern continent, called Jambudvipa. The entire world-system is then encircled by a range of outer iron mountains.

Mount Meru itself is partly submerged in the ocean, with half of its height rising above the water. Some of the heavens belonging to the desire realm are located on or around Mount Meru, while others are above it. Beyond the desire realm, there are the seventeen heavens of the form realm, and above those lies the formless realm.

This model comes from the Abhidharma tradition, which developed in early Buddhism, and this is just one way Buddhism has described the universe. It is said that some practitioners in ancient times could directly perceive this cosmology during meditation, though most people today may not experience it in the same way. Elements of this cosmology are often reflected in Buddhist mandalas and visualizations. However, it is important to note that this should not be considered the ultimate view of Buddhism on the universe. The Kalachakra tradition, for example, explains the universe in a different way.

In fact, in ancient India, it was common for people to believe that Mount Meru stood at the center of the world. To better connect with people and guide them, the Buddha often adapted his teachings to fit these cultural beliefs. That is likely why early Buddhist scriptures describe the universe in this way.

As the Buddha once said, "I do not dispute with the world; it is the world that disputes with me." For example, even though the Buddha understood that there is no permanent "self" in the ultimate sense, he sometimes spoke that there was, to help people who held that belief get started on the Buddhist path. These are examples of skillful means—teachings tailored to the diverse capacities and dispositions of different individuals.

It is similar to how textbooks are written differently in the East and West, each suited to its own culture. In the same way, the Buddha's skillful teachings are valuable for study, but we should not mistake them for his ultimate view.

Question 2 Buddhism teaches that within a single atom, there exist countless worlds. How should we understand this idea?

Khenpo Sodargye In the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, it says, "In every atom, there are pure realms as numerous as the atoms in the universe, and in each realm, there are buddhas beyond all imagination." For most of us, this is a pretty hard concept to grasp. But if we understand that everything in the world is, by nature, empty—meaning nothing has an inherent existence—then this idea is not so far-fetched. If an atom were not empty by nature, it could not possibly contain even one more atom, let alone countless worlds. But because of this emptiness, there is really no fundamental difference between the nature of a single atom and that of countless worlds.

When we have not realized the truth of emptiness, it seems like a single atom and countless worlds would get in each other's way. But once we realize emptiness, we see that their essence is the same, and they do not actually block each other. This is

what Buddhism means when it says "one is many, and many are one," or "form is emptiness, and emptiness is form." If you look at this idea of emptiness through the lens of quantum mechanics, it might become much easier to grasp

Question 3 I have been thinking about dreams and how they relate to our inner and outer worlds. If our dreams are manifestations of our karma in various forms, could we see them as our own little universes within our minds? Or do they somehow connect to the outer reality as well?

Khenpo Sodargye That is a good question, and it touches on some deep ideas. There is a famous story from ancient China called Zhuangzi's "Dream of a Butterfly." In the story, Zhuangzi dreamt that he was a butterfly, happily fluttering about, feeling joyful and free, completely unaware that he was actually Zhuangzi. When he woke up suddenly, he found himself distinctly Zhuangzi once more. At that moment, he was not sure if he was Zhuangzi dreaming of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuangzi. This story really gets at the heart of how blurry the line can be between dreams and reality.

In a way, our whole life is a dream. Why do I say that? Well, everything in a dream disappears when we wake up, and in the same way, everything we experience today will be gone when tomorrow comes. So, what happened before yesterday is really no different from last night's dream, and what is yet to come after tomorrow is just like tomorrow night's dream. Tibetan Buddhism actually has a lot of teachings that explore the connection between dreams and reality.

Ultimately speaking, both the outside world and our own bodies do not have any substantial existence. On the relative level, they are as fleeting and illusory as dreams, mirages, bubbles, or shadows. That is, when unexamined, they seem real, but upon closer examination, none of them exists for real. If we can understand this and apply it to our daily life, it can help us loosen our strong attachments to things.

Of course, putting this teaching into practice in daily life takes time and practice. To share my own experience, I have a less-than-ideal habit: when something unpleasant happens, I remind myself, "Do not take it too seriously—by tomorrow, it will be just like a dream." But when something good happens, I sometimes think, "Even though I know this is just like a dream, I wish it could last a little longer!" Still, if we keep reminding ourselves

of this principle, no matter what we are going through, it can really help us keep a balanced and peaceful state of mind.

Question 4 I read an article about the Catholic Church Pope openly supporting scientific theories like the Big Bang and evolution. I am curious to hear your opinion on such a major religious figure embracing these scientific ideas.

Khenpo Sodargye Actually, when it comes to the Big Bang theory, humanity is still very much in the process of exploring and understanding it. Scientists estimate that the Big Bang happened about 13.8 billion years ago. They have discovered that our universe is expanding, and many believe this expansion is speeding up because of dark energy. Some researchers have also suggested that the universe might go through cycles of expansion and contraction, so there could be recurring Big Bang events. Some are exploring whether the Big Bang was a one-time event or if it might have happened in other universes as well. So, there are different viewpoints, and much of the research is still based on estimation and hypotheses.

I think it is valuable for religions, including Catholicism and others, to bring their own perspectives and teachings into these discussions. Sometimes, religious traditions can offer

inspiration or new ways of thinking about these big questions. Many religions in this world are very ancient—some have been around for thousands of years, some over three thousand, and some over a thousand years. For example, Islam has a history of more than 1,400 years. These ancient teachings might provide insights or ideas that could be helpful for cosmological research. So, whether it is a major religion or a smaller one, as long as the search for truth is approached with balance and openness, I think it is something to be encouraged.

Living on this planet, whether we are students, teachers, or religious practitioners, it is important for all of us to seek truth in this world. This is a responsibility we all share. We may not find all the answers in our lifetime, but in today's free and equal world, we each have the chance to use our wisdom to explore the richness of human civilization and the mysteries of the universe and life itself. I think that is a truly meaningful pursuit.

Question 5 You mentioned earlier that an Indian astronomer predated Copernicus and Galileo in understanding the structure of our solar system. What was his name, and what are the Buddhist sources you referenced on this topic?

Khenpo Sodargye The name of the astronomer I mentioned is Aryabhata, and his notable work is called the *Aryabhatiya*. As for the idea of "worlds as numerous as the sands of the Ganges River," that comes from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*. If you are interested in learning more about Buddhist cosmology, I also recommend looking into the *Kalachakra Tantra* and the *Pearl Garland Tantra*. All of these texts are available in Tibetan.

Question 6 Living in this secular world, how should we deal with attachment?

Khenpo Sodargye I think it is natural to have some healthy attachments in life, but it is important not to let them become excessive, because that can lead to a lot of suffering. About six hundred years ago, the great Tibetan master Longchenpa said, "The greater the attachment, the greater the pain." For example, the more desire or anger we hold onto, the more we tend to suffer.

Of course, as ordinary people, it is neither possible nor necessary to give up all our worldly pursuits. Wanting to achieve something meaningful or to pursue truth, goodness, and beauty is a normal part of life. But if we become too attached to things

like romantic relationships or wealth, it can cause a lot of problems—our minds become more troubled, our health can suffer, and sometimes our efforts do not work out as we hoped.

Question 7 In our textbook, it says that the Buddha became an arhat through meditation. Why did the Buddha not achieve buddhahood instead?

Khenpo Sodargye According to the Shravakayana tradition, the Buddha is described as having reached the state of a Great Arhat. This is because, in that tradition, the idea of buddhahood—a state where all cognitive obscurations are completely eliminated—is not really recognized. For shravakas, the highest goal is to become a Great Arhat, so they see the Buddha as having achieved that.

However, from the Mahayana perspective, the description is different. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha did not become an arhat. Instead, he followed the bodhisattva path, which includes the five paths and ten bhumis (or stages), and directly attained buddhahood—a state of complete and perfect enlightenment. So, the answer really depends on which Buddhist tradition you are looking at.

Dedication

May the merit resulting from this piece of work contribute in the greatest possible measure to the long life of all great masters, to the flourishing of the Buddhadharma, and to the welfare of all sentient beings.

It is always our wish to present a work of the highest quality to the readers so that anyone who reads this text would find inspiration. So we would very much appreciate your comments, feedback or suggestions for how this text might be improved and made more valuable. You are also greatly welcomed if you want to make a contribution to any of our other projects of translation. Please email us at: *translation@khenposodargye.org*